



House Carfax

passage into horror



For JaneyBird
and all those
poisoned pigeons.

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WOLF WITCH

I want to bite you,
with the teeth of a wolf.

I want to feel
your flesh tear
and taste the hot sweetness
of your blood.

I want to devour you
in a moment of lupine passion.

To rip your throat,
and hear the drum beat
of your passion
as it slows and stops.

And then,
to lie beside you,
slick with blood...

What is life,
if not for this?

by Kimberly Hall

DOUBLE OR NOTHING

by Chris Hudak

Vult and Cole had been discussing business when the girl walked through the main gate of Holy Wood, a large, rambling cemetery spiked with vulturous oaks. Their discussion trailed off. The two old men silently watched the girl through the cemetery office window as she walked slowly by, heading down Warder Path, through the burial ground's labyrinth.

The girl's pretty face was as cloudy and dismal as the leaden sky above her, and her eyes held the threat of rain.

Vult turned to his younger partner and lifted an eyebrow.

"Her. Her and whatever her situation is. And you with your young man."

The younger man watched her, considering. "I don't know...look at her. Look at the pain on that face. Won't be much for you to do...."

"Yes." Vult turned to the window again. "Starting to doubt your abilities?"

The girl dropped out of sight behind a tombstone-studded rise.

Cole frowned. "Hardly. Further, I don't think you realize how much the young man also suffers," he warned.

"I understand enough," Vult answered without turning around.

"All right," Cole said. He smiled thinly, and held the office door open to the grey day outside. "As I believe the saying goes, you're on. And as I also believe the saying goes, it's your funeral."

The balding man gave him a black look as he passed, and pity crossed his face as he walked after the grief-stricken young lady.

Linda felt numb, distant, standing before the markers in the chilling dusk. She didn't feel like she belonged here. Even though she didn't now have a memory of it, she had come to a stop before the family markers after walking for an eternity, and then she had deliberately not looked at them as she: dug in her pockets to see how much change she had; rubbed her jeaned leg and wondered at how quiet this place could be; tilted her head back and marveled at the seeming nearness of the sky; took a minute to remember if 7-11 sold beef jerky for thirty-five cents or forty-five cents; wondered if she should write to somebody, she

was sure she owed a letter to somebody out there, she'd never, after all, answered her brother's last -

-oh, something else, what to do-

-last rites, oh her brother-

-Mike!-

She crushed her eyes shut against the amazingly sudden, hot tears that were coming, her face silently twisting into a grimace.

oh Mike, oh Mom, oh Daddy, oh GOD-

The tears seemed to come far too quickly to even be cried, and she imagined that her sudden headache was the result of some sort of backup. Her mind trailed off on this track of thought for a while, conjuring feverish images of a network of tear ducts and tissue, and she concentrated on the path the tears took through this network for as long as she could, but it only made her head ache worse. She had a blurry image as she looked down at the pavement of individual teardrops falling with impossible slowness before crashing to a termination. Plop, plop, plop, and three of them were gone, just like that. No argument. No discussion. Gone.

One little two little three little-

She inhaled a sharp, wracking sob and lapsed back into silent agony. Those three grey slabs just stared back at her. It had been only thirty miles per hour, the officer had told her. Slow. Just thirty! Just - *thirty is three times ten, ten times three*

"Hello, Miss. My name is-"

Three times, three, three, all three of them

"Lewis Vult...I'm terribly sorry, Miss Sanders," he said, emphasizing the sibilants. Proud of his cleverness.

She nodded swiftly, tightly, her eyes wrinkled slits.

"Thuh-thank-." That was all she could get out, and she was thinking of the time they'd been to Disneyland and Mike had wanted to ride in the same mechanical Dumbo elephant she had. She'd said no. *Dear God, why didn't I say, Yeah, sure, little brother. C'mon, kiddo.*

Dear Jesus, why didn't I?

"Ah. We're closing the gates soon, Miss. Come now, it's late."

"Kiddo," she whimpered, and allowed him to put a suited black arm around her and lead her back up Warder Path to the main office.

Vult was throwing away the styrofoam coffee cup the girl had just finished, while Cole sat at the window and watched as she trudged back through the main gate, through the dark to her small car.

"How'd it go?" Cole asked.

Vult shrugged. "I can't tell. What about the young man? He lost his family to - what was it, a-

"It was a gas fire. It happened while they were asleep."

"Is he the only - is his situation like the girl's?"

Cole looked up at him. "I don't understand."

Vult's creased face creased further with a lopsided grin. "I'm waiting for the truth." His folded hands rested on his polished dark desk.

"I really don't know what you mean."

Vult looked to his left and lazily leafed through a casket brochure, waiting.

Cole cracked, "All right! No, he's not the last. He has...it's a brother, I think."

Vult's grin widened.

"But that one's neurotic," said Cole.

Vult nodded. "Oh."

"And suicidal," Cole added quickly.

"Aaah," the older man said. "I see."

Smug bastard. "Well, he is!" Cole insisted.

Vult cocked his head, and his old eyes grew large and dewey. They looked quite hideous. "Oh, I believe you," he assured. Then he chuckled.

Cole felt a laugh working its way up in spite of himself. "Bastard," he muttered.

"If so," the older man said, rising, "the world will never know." Wind whipped outside the cemetery office, and Vult dialed a phone number quickly and surely, from habit. Cole poured himself another cup of coffee, utterly black, retired to his familiar leather chair, and listened as the older son got ready to wind up his end of things. Cole, on the other hand, accepted bitterly that he could do no more until the following day when the young man came for his regular Sunday visit. Cole became even more disgruntled.. Vult was a shrewd, skilled old soldier, all right. He knew the ones to pick. He knew this game inside out.

"Yes," Vult said, staring luxuriously at the ceiling. "Kay and Hunter Monument Dealers? Yes, let me speak to Boris, miss." A silence. "Not if I'm calling he's not. Tell him this is Lewis Vult from Holy Wood. He'll miraculously get unbusy. Now go and tell him, I'll wait." Cole drank another third of his coffee before Vult spoke again. "Boris! Good evening to you too! Boris, I know you're busy, let me get right to it. I need a revision." His eyes suddenly seemed charged. "No. Excuse me. I need three revisions."

Cole choked quietly on his coffee. A squawk issued forth from the receiver - Cole could hear it all the way across the oak-panelled office. Cole lifted his cup in a toast and then thumbed his nose at Vult. Three revisions. Right. Who was the old buzzard trying to fool?

"No no, not mistakes, my good man, your work is excellent, have I not always said so? It was an informational error on my part, but it needs correcting. No, no, I wouldn't - three *new* ones. I'll pick them up in a few days. Yes. The revisions are somewhat long, and there are three. Get ready to take this down..."

My God, he's serious, thought Cole, though not really surprised. He shook his head, draining his cup. How many thousands of dollars would that put him back, on account of this girl? It's a matter of pride to him, he marveled, and shook his head again as Vult spoke into the phone, making himself heard over the rain outside.

The next day's weather wasn't much better. The sky was still oppressive and metallic, but it was warmer, at least. Vult watched as Cole fixed himself a cup of coffee and then joined him.

Outside the office window, Miss Sanders walked slowly down Warder to pay another grieved visit to her family's graves.

"Imagine," Vult said, watching her. "Every other family member, all at once. A triple-shock to the girl."

Cole nodded. "And no mother or father to cry to."

The two men watched awhile longer, then Vult patted the younger man gently on the back. "But, pardon the cliché, life goes on, does it not?"

Cole returned the pat on the back in kind and offered a thin smile. "It does at that."

Linda continued her ritual procrastination for as long as her numbed mind would allow, but then brought her gaze to the stones that marked her family's too-recent - she couldn't bring herself to think of

or visualize the word. Their...passing. That was a good word. Passing.
It sounded different -

different - there's a difference here

No, she thought. No more surprises. Not right now.

different, something is different

The tombstones. They were different.

As tears began to well up in her eyes, she strained to read the engravings she had not read before. The first stone read:

SAMUEL R. SANDERS

1940 - 1985

SEPARATED FROM HIS DAUGHTER

FOREVER

Linda was jolted, horrified - tears burning with heat and salt and anguish flooded down her cheeks. She looked to the left of the first stone.

oh God no it's some kind of cruel-

MANDY SANDERS

1943 - 1985

Wife of Samuel Sanders

CLAWING AT THE WALL OF DARKNESS

Linda uttered a small cry, and her legs buckled under her.

no oh God no please stop it no more I'm so sorry oh

And, as through a fish-eyed lens:

MICHAEL S. SANDERS

1972 - 1985

Son of Samuel and Mandy Sanders

HELP PLEASE TAKE ME HOME

I AM AFRAID

Linda broke into heaving, painful sobs and clapped a hand over her mouth, her vision a field of grey, running globes. She collapsed into a heap on the damp grass, shuddering. She felt a lurching in her stomach; vomit ran between her fingers.

oh Mike oh Daddy I'm so sorry please I miss you so much please

She opened her eyes - and locked her gaze forward, incredulous. Even the searing image of her little brother's warm face was pushed aside.

Driven into the earth a foot before her, beside her brother's grave, was a long, gleaming knife with a handle as black as midnight and death.

Linda blinked, sniffing tears, unbelieving, and for no reason she was thinking of Disneyland and Mike's face, and

Son of Samuel and Mandy Sarrow

more tears came, blinding and hot.

Kiddo.

She worked the knife out of the ground with trembling hands, and the walking path seemed far away and the skies wept and the tombstones mourned in the rain. And the grass began to turn red.

Cole shut the office door and put his umbrella in the brass holder. Across the room, Vult was brewing coffee. Cole walked up to the older man's desk. Vult looked up from his seat.

"You slippery bastard."

Vult smiled thinly and held out his hand, rubbing his thumb and first two fingers together.

"I know, I saw it," Cole said, and took out his wallet, slowly, as if it hurt him. Oh, and it did. "And that young man of mine was almost at the edge. I really thought I'd get a full set first this time. You true bastard."

Vult took the ten, crisp dollar bills from him, leaned back extravagantly, and waved the bills in the air. He chuckled.

Outside the window, a middle-aged woman walked slowly past the window. Her shoulders were hunched. If her eyes had ever held the light of happiness, it had gone out of them.

Cole turned to Vult with a face alight with hope and challenge.

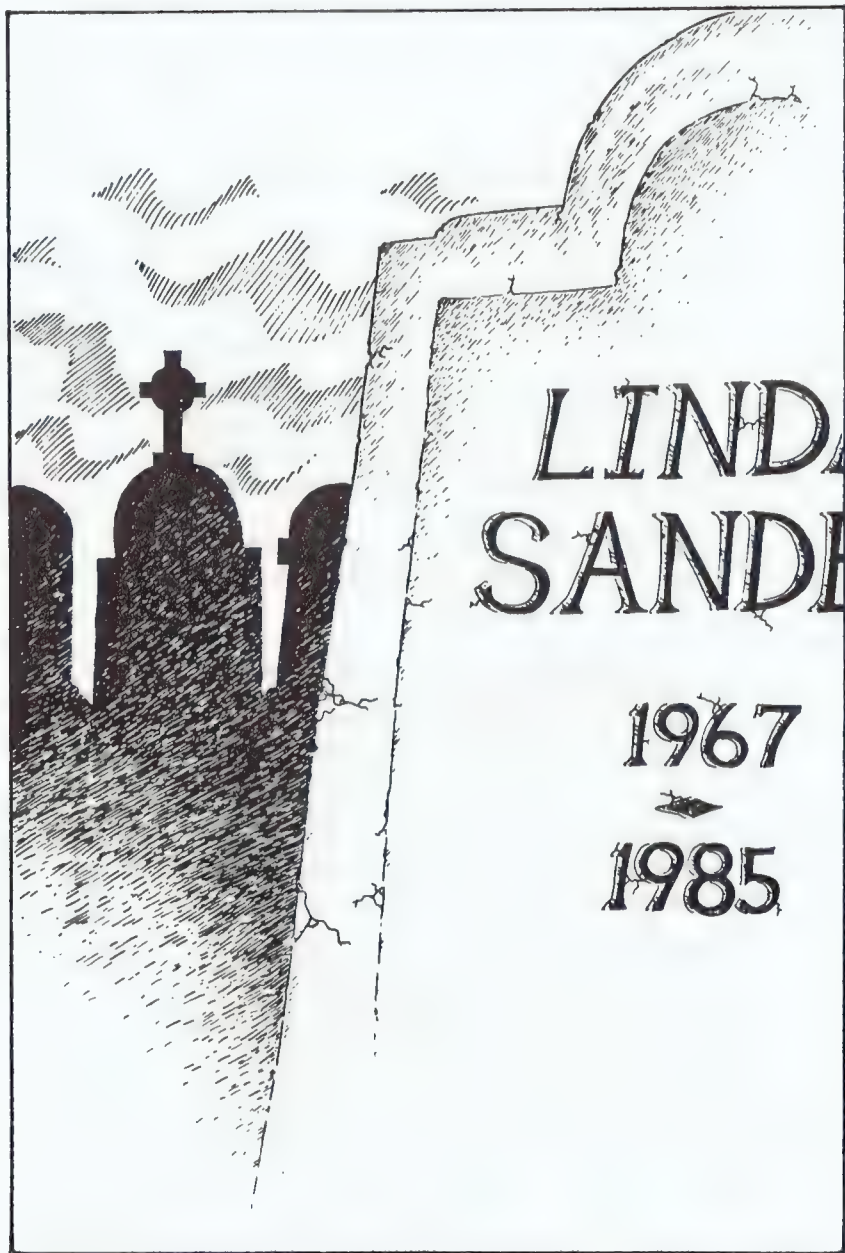
"I still have the young man," he said, grinning. "Give an old fella another chance?"

Vult smiled back, thumbing through the dollar bills.

"As always," he answered.

And outside, the rain continued to fall.





THE HOWLING WIND

The wind comes howling through the night
The moon shows but a crack of light;
Tree limbs scrape and make a sound
Like a witch's cackle above the ground.

The leaves they cause the wind to Whooo
A battalion of ghosts are coming for you!
When you're alone on this ghastly night
You hear the words in wind-blown flight:

"Whooo dares to stand so in my way?"
"Dooo you challenge my power?" you hear it
say.

This night does not belong to God,
But tortured souls beneath the sod,
And to the creatures of the night -
If you are mortal, you'd best take flight.

You hear the windows rattle more!
Don't heed the scratching at the door!
Those demons from Hell would like to enter,
They ride the winds from out Hell's center.

They'll take your soul from where you sit
And carry it back to the bottomless pit.
Don't heed the wind as it blows tonight,
And pray the locks will all hold tight
Until the sun with its bright light
Will drive back the demons for another night.

by Robert Russell

THE BAD WOOD

by Pierre LaBossière

It was called the Bad Wood - a black grove of trees beyond the farm that spread as far as the eye could see. Since her grandmother had died, Anna could not keep her thoughts from it.

She would stand at her bedroom window, gazing at the Bad Wood every night. Tonight, as every night, it seemed the full moon must be out, though Anna knew that a full moon couldn't shine every night. Through the muted light she watched the tree leaves quiver from the winds gusting off the prairie. The trees seemed to be waving to her and only her, beckoning.

What was to be found among the trees? She wondered at this, yearning as she had since she was a little girl, to explore the Wood. Since her grandmother's death that yearning had grown until she thought she would explode.

Her mother had warned her about the Bad Wood. She could lose her way. There were animals - wolves, wildcats, bears. She could hurt an ankle on an exposed root and her cries wouldn't be heard. The Bad Wood was forbidden to her.

As she slept, finally tiring of standing by the window, the rustling of the trees would treat her to a lullaby.

Yet, she slept poorly these nights. She dreamt of spiders - hated, loathsome spiders, huge and bloated, concealed in the corners of her room and the closets of her house. She'd try to run from them, but from the ceiling they'd drop, landing wet and heavy on her shoulders, biting at her with hideous jaws. Always she awoke sweating and panting. Sometimes she couldn't even get back to sleep, spending the night warily eyeing the corners of her bedroom.

The night her grandmother died, Anna was allowed to spend five minutes alone with her in her room at the back of the house. Anna told her of how the Wood seemed to be calling to her, thinking her grandma might know why, for she'd lived on the farm for many, many years.

The old woman was also fond of telling stories of how she was part Indian, and that the tribe her ancestors belonged to had lived in this valley for longer than anyone knew. Anna asked if she knew any old Indian stories about the Wood.

"Aye, the trees, they sing in the wind, like songbirds after a spring rain," her grandmother replied. "Can you hear the words in their songs?"

Anna looked at her, confused, and asked, "Why does Mama call it the Bad Wood?"

Her grandmother smiled. "Is that what your Mama says? The Wood is not bad, little one. It is merely a different place, an old place."

"Is it older than you?"

"Oh yes, it is much older than I, older than even *my* grandmama. It is older than this farm, older than any of the towns in the valley, older yet than the Indians! Its roots go straight to the center of the Earth, child."

"Is that why Mama calls it the Bad Wood? Because it's so old?"

Her grandmother's tone grew hushed. "Your Mama was not meant to understand. You and I are! Do not let yourself fear the singing of the trees, child."

The old one drifted to sleep, worn out by their short talk.

That night, Anna asked God to make her grandmother better. She asked God why he had made spiders, so wicked and ugly. She asked why spiders should live in the world when her grandmother was so ill. She asked God to make her not afraid of spiders.

Her prayers had proved fruitless. A cold rain fell during her grandmother's burial on the big hill overlooking the valley where Anna lived. She could see her house from that hill, and the Bad Wood beyond. It didn't sing to her.

Anna didn't cry. She knew that wouldn't have been brave.

After that day, Anna's mother wouldn't let her out of her sight, as though she knew Anna and her grandmother had talked of the Bad Wood.

As she played in the pastures around her house, chasing her father's pet geese or trying to catch butterflies, her mother watched from the porch, always on the lookout, making sure that she didn't set foot into the Wood.

Each evening, Anna would sit on the porch step, waiting for her father to return from his hard work in the fields. Lately, she'd catch herself looking past the dirt path that led to their house, toward the Wood. Behind her, she could feel her mother's gaze at her back.

One evening, when her father was late - it was harvest time and the hours were long and hard - Anna felt her mother's hands on her shoulders.

"What is it about the Wood that interests you so?" she asked, squeezing her hands tight on Anna's shoulders.

"I don't know," Anna replied. "I just want to know why I can't play there. It doesn't look much different than the wood behind our school, and no one calls that a Bad Wood."

"This one is different," her mother said.

"How?"

Her mother turned her so they faced each other. "It's not like most woods. It's not just trees and bushes and rocks. It's not a place for little girls. I don't want you thinking about it so much. I don't want you listening to the wind at night."

How had she known about the wind? Anna wondered, and she was suddenly frightened - scared for the first time of the Bad Wood. There was no conviction in her mother's voice, as though she knew it wouldn't do any good to try to keep Anna away. She and the Bad Wood were drawn together by Fate.

Her mother handed her a small wicker basket. "We need eggs for breakfast," she said in a faltering voice. "Go to the barn and fetch some."

"Do I have to?" Anna asked weakly.

Her mother eyed her crossly. "Yes, you must. I expect to see eggs in the icebox 'fore dark."

Anna fingered the wicker basket, watching her mother entering the house. She didn't move from the porch until her father arrived, sweaty and grimy from the day's field work. Immediately, her father spotted the wicker basket, and took her by the hand, leading her to the barn.

"Do I have to, Papa?"

"Your mother gave you a chore to do," he replied in a voice husky with fatigue.

She looked at the barn, and swallowed hard. "But, there's spiders in the barn!"

"A chore's a chore, Anna."

Her father led her to the chicken coop in the back of the barn, where the cobwebs were thick as cotton. He stood by the coop and handed her the basket.

She returned his gaze with a look of defiance, and reached into the chicken coop, not daring to look inside. She knew she'd see the webs of the big red spiders that liked dark and moist corners. She reached, touching the eggs, praying that she wouldn't feel tiny legs crawling on her hand. From the coop, she pulled four eggs, put them in the basket and displayed them to her father, hoping four would be enough. She breathed a sigh of relief when he smiled at her, and taking her hand, he led her back to the house for dinner.

She hadn't shown him how afraid she had been.

Her father checked the corners of her room that night, the way he did every night, assuring her that there weren't any cobwebs hidden in her room. He tucked her in, read a story and kissed her good night. She didn't feel his kiss; she'd long since fallen asleep.

She awoke that night, but not from a spider dream. Her room was dazzling bright from the moonlight. The wind gently rippled the curtains at her window. She went to the window, saw the trees dancing in the light, heard the wind calling to her. Amongst the whispering of the Wood, she heard a new sound, yet an oddly familiar one.

It was her grandmother's voice, calling her name, sighing like the wind, like the trees.

Anna nearly convulsed with longing. She could stand it no longer.

She dressed in her overalls, tiptoed down the stairs and, climbing on top of the kitchen counter, took the lantern that sat above the cupboards.

The Wood wasn't far, but it seemed a boundless distance. Her lantern lighted the path as she trudged through the fields, being careful not to stumble on the big divots made by her father's horses. Her hands growing numb in the night frost, she eventually reached the edge of the Wood. Holding up her lantern, she saw the feathery branches of the trees hanging limp and dank. She smelled the wet rot of decaying wood.

The wind kicked up, and the leaves rustled. Beyond the branches, she again heard her grandmother calling. Her heart pounded with excitement.

She stepped through the Wood's fringe, glancing over her shoulder at her house, now looking tiny and insignificant beyond the fields.

Fallen trunks and exposed roots slowed her progress, but the moonlight helped, lighting a haphazard track that almost resembled a path.

Suddenly her lantern gave out. She stopped, her heart skipping a beat. Then she relaxed, realizing that the moon would provide more than ample light. She moved on, but stopped again as she heard a loud rustling amongst the trees. It was a different sort of sound than the trees' windsong. She blinked, not trusting the tricky glow of moonlight. The branches all around her seemed alive.

She felt her blood turn cold. The feathery growths covering the branches looked like cobwebs.

Her grandmother continued calling, and warily she moved on, averting her eyes from the branches, keeping focused on her footsteps on the uneven ground. The rustling grew more audible, more distinct. She heard a sound something like the clicking of teeth.

Ahead of her the forest floor came alive. The ground quivered like the surface of a wind-swept lake. Suddenly, she could see them converging upon her, scrambling down the branches, dropping to the ground on invisible threads.

Spiders. Thousands of them. They hovered above her, crept up from behind, or waited ahead. Some were big - as big as pumpkins. She watched their bodies throbbing, as if they'd just eaten still-living prey that were weakly trying to squirm out of their bellies.

"Grandma," she whispered desperately. Behind her the big ones circled around, allowing her no retreat. She fought the urge to run, sensing that somehow, this would incite them further.

Mustering as much courage as she could, she stepped forward, toward her grandmother's voice, toward the heart of the forest. She felt the smaller bodies crunch under her shoes, felt their abdomens burst under her weight, their foul smelling guts splurting and staining her shoes and overalls.

Still, she plodded on, hoping, knowing, *certain* that the trees which sang lullabies wouldn't betray her, wouldn't let her be harmed.

From the branches, more spiders dropped. She felt them on her arms, her shoulders, her neck. She fought the urge to scream, fearing they might crawl into her mouth if she dared.

The big ones were above her knees now. She felt one getting inside her overalls. It was crawling up her leg. She fought the urge to slap at

the spiders under her overalls, knowing that would only anger them. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Without screams or wild flailing at the beasts, crying was the only outlet for her terror.

She cowered as a huge albino spider, nearly as big as a wheelbarrow, stood fat and hissing before her. But she refused to retreat. She tried to step around the giant spider, but it jerked toward her, (to attack?) and her foot came down into it, breaking wetly through its abdomen. Black fluid showered from the wound, staining her face and filling the cool air with steam.

Her leg was caught in the great spider's body as it struggled violently in its death throes. She felt herself falling, unable to keep her balance with her trapped leg, as more pumpkin-sized spiders converged on her from all sides.

The moment before she fell she saw what seemed like millions of baby spiders, with too many legs and their bodies as crystal-clear as soap bubbles, scurrying from the body of the giant spider. And she realized the giant had been the mother. The baby spiders had jaws, ringed with razor-sharp teeth.

They lunged at her as she fell, ravenous with hunger. She plunged into the great spider's abdomen, shutting her eyes, and feeling the blistering hot black fluid flow over her like rain, and she thought in panic that her grandmother might not come for her, that the trees - with their windsong - would betray her.

She lay on the ground crying, for how long she didn't know. Finally, she looked up and found herself in the middle of a circular meadow, bordered by a neat ring of polished stones.

Before her stood a king, and she could tell he was a king by his bejeweled crown and scepter. He walked up to Anna, and lifted her chin with a finger, inspecting her, looking into her soul. Behind him, she watched his subjects - the forest denizens - coming out of the trees and stones, where they dwelt by day, sleeping, waiting for the delicious moonlight which they drank like wine.

You are the One. You will do, said the king.

Now in the evenings, she still waited on the porch for her father. Harvest time was in full bloom, and he would return very late, well after the swollen sun sank beyond the horizon, beyond the Great Wood. Always, as she waited, she kept a watchful eye on the Wood.

Now she knew why her mother had feared. She was no longer her daughter. She was a child of the Wood.

She kept an ear to the sound of a woodsman's axe many miles distant. It was another wood; there was nothing to fear. She could hear sounds very far away now, and see great distances.

She wouldn't let harm come to this Wood, whose roots reached to the center of the Earth, and whose borders stretched as far as the eye could see, far away to the frozen reaches of the North, where only the strongest of creatures survived.

It was a task that would take much courage, but she no longer feared. She walked in the Wood any time she pleased, swimming in the living net that held together the oaks, elms, firs, willows, toadstools and ferns. And yes, the spiders, too. She walked in the Wood that sought her out, exposed her. The Wood where spiders spun net webs in the crooks of tree limbs, and circular webs between the branches, where spiders fed upon the forest and later became its food.

Anna didn't fear these creatures now. She saw that they were all part of the savage order, and nothing more.

What saddened her was her daughter wouldn't ever know this honor. Ah, but her granddaughter would be blessed!

She spotted a small daddy long-legs crawling on her overalls. She lifted the spider by one of its legs and held it for a moment, smiling. She put it down and watched it scurry off.





BLOSSOMS

Each night we unfold ourselves.
Like pale roses,
we rise through coarse earth
to walk among you.

Your warmth moves us,
the press of your flesh
reminds us...
All is lost.

In spite of you
we surrender ourselves
to the quiet earth.

by Kimberly Hall

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ON FILE AT THE COMPLAINT DEPT: ABRACADABRA, INC.

by T. A. Freeman

To: The Main Office
ABRACADABRA ENTERPRISES, INC.
RE: Item No. 0310-666

Dear Management:

Last month my kids insisted that I buy them your Halloween kit: "Incredible Instant Halloween Monsters." For several months prior to this, they had seen your advertisements on the t.v. stating how Halloween was just around the corner and that they should be the "first on the block" to get the kit which was "guaranteed to scare the daylight's out of friends and relatives."

Tommy, six years old and the youngest of our two, was adamant about getting the kit that featured werewolves. Cindy on the other hand insisted on the "Witches and Warlocks" package. To keep them both happy, and not play favorites, I purchased "Dracula and Friends."

The instructions were easy enough to follow. Just mix the various packets provided in the kit (after sunset), let stand for several minutes in a cool, dark place, and presto-chango, "Instant Vampires" would crawl forth from the concoction. I would like to know how your firm managed to come up with the process of creating miniature, life-like figures capable of flying about, apparently on their own, and then vanishing into thin air in about 30 minutes. Unfortunately, I was to find out later on by accident that these seemingly harmless toys are a menace.

Your kits contain enough material to create the effect three times during the night. The first time we tried it, the night before our Halloween party, things went fairly well. We mixed the ingredients according to the directions on the box, noting that you insist that it be hand-stirred and that under no circumstances should more than one set of packets be used at a time. My wife, Kathy, didn't like the idea of me and the kids using one of her mixing bowls, but Tommy and Cindy pleaded until she gave in.

I was skeptical at first, remembering my own childhood experience with so-called "Sea Monkeys." And even though your product has all but destroyed any semblance of sanity in this house, I must admit I was awe-struck when the first of the little vamps crawled from the iridescent-green ectoplasmic goo.

Now I'll tell you exactly what happened. Just as your instructions said it would, the contents of the bowl began to bubble and emit a strange fog-like mist similar to the dry-ice we used to play with in science class. We gathered around expectantly, and then, as if by magic, a small figure covered with the green substance emerged on the surface and began to pull itself out of the muck. Grabbing the edge of the bowl with tiny hands, it did a back-flip off the rim and landed on its feet on the counter. Cindy screamed, Tommy started giggling and covorting, and Kathy and I stared in disbelief.

Within a few seconds the goo evaporated off the small figure, and there stood a two-inch tall replica of a stereotypical vampire dressed in tux and long black cape. The bowl, still bubbling, attracted our attention again as another figure surfaced. By the time the second had reached the rim, the first had taken to the air and was circling the kitchen erratically like a moth seeking light. As the second one stood drying off on the counter, a third materialized.

This process repeated itself perhaps thirty times in the succeeding five minutes until the air in our kitchen was alive and buzzing with a swarm of miniature vampires. Some darted about haphazardly, some would dive at our heads, and others would swoop and soar like circus aerial acrobats. By this time Cindy had lost her fear, and Tommy had calmed down considerably. Both sat on the floor completely entranced as if staring into an exotic fish tank. For the life of me I can't remember exactly what thoughts were going through my head, but I'm sure they were nearly the same as Kathy's. I can only hope the look on my face was not as blank.

The thirty-minute effect literally flew by (no pun intended). I'm sure that the first of the little vamps we saw make its way out of the bowl was also the first to go, but you couldn't tell, since they all looked the same. Eventually however, their numbers started to decrease. And within five minutes, they were all gone, simply vanishing into thin, yet well-agitated air, leaving us with a strange, misplaced feeling of sadness that it was all over.

Things would have gotten back to normal and we would have repeated the effect for the Halloween party the next night, except that little Tommy, in his zeal to re-animate the vampires on a grander scale, took matters into his own hands that night.

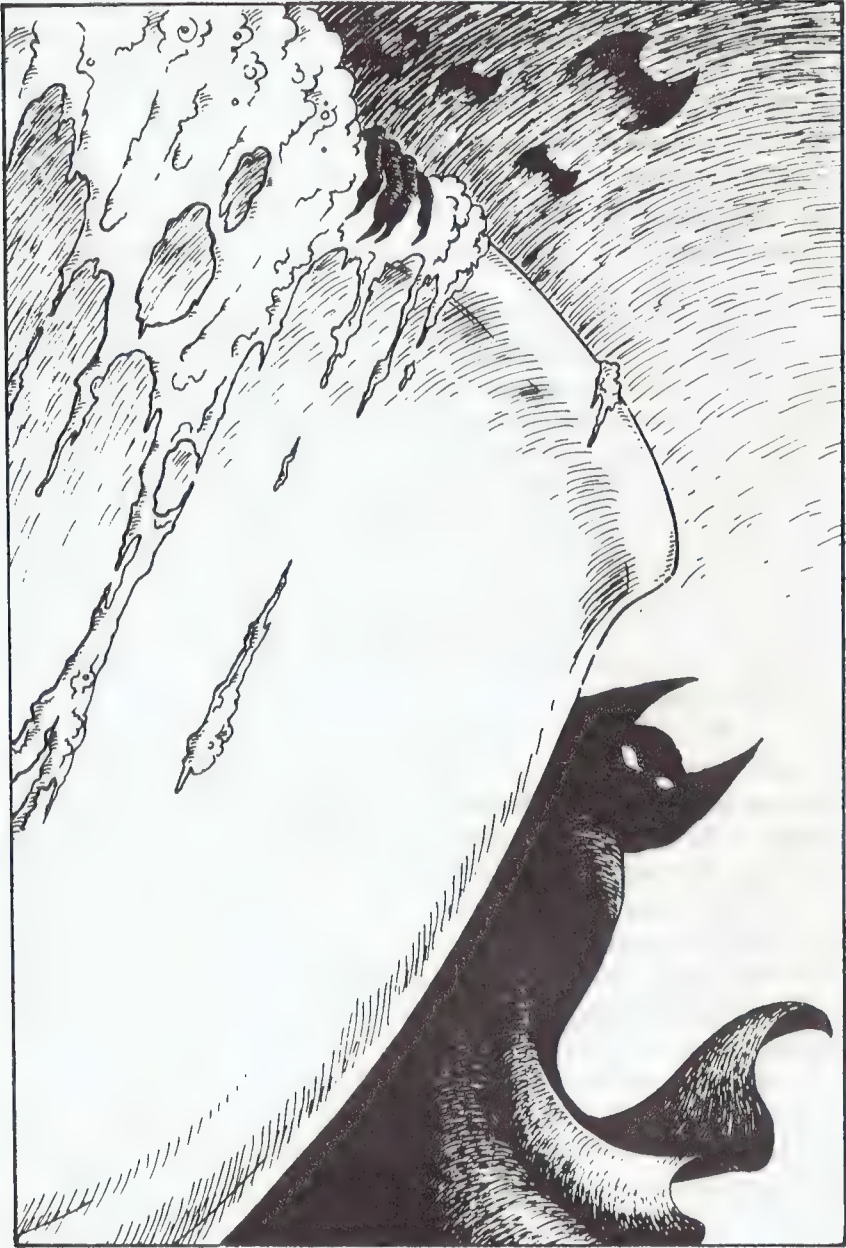
Kathy and I were upstairs watching the monologue on the Carson Show when all of a sudden the lights started flickering and the t.v. screen turned to snow. Downstairs Tommy was screaming with delight at the top of his lungs.

Kathy and I rushed down to see what had happened and were met with a wave of fluttering mini-vamps pouring from the kitchen like thousands of crazed hornets wearing tuxedos. We both hit the floor as the airborne mass made its way into the living room. Crawling into the kitchen on all fours, we found Tommy sitting on the floor giggling, surrounded by what looked like the results of a small nuclear explosion.

Tommy, in his impatience, had mixed the entire remaining contents of the packets with a blender which subsequently boiled over and shorted out, spewing green goo everywhere. I have no idea how or what caused the following current situation, but I'm sure that your company must have tested for this kind of thing and I would truly like some answers.

We waited, hoping that this new flock of vampires would vanish from our house...we've been waiting for nearly a month now. During the day they're in the attic, the cupboards, the pantry, and in our closets. At night most of them leave - some by the chimney, some through the windows open doors. The situation wouldn't be so bad except they always come home to roost. We tried everything from flyswatters to insecticides (which only makes them a bit dizzy), but we can't kill them. And what really bothers us is that there seems to be more of them each day. At first there were perhaps a few hundred, now there must be several thousands.

We can't get any sleep. Our neighbors are complaining. If we don't get some help soon, we're going to have to move out of our home. I've decided to seek legal action against your company if you do not take care of this immediately.

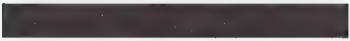


From: The Main Office
ABRACADABRA ENTERPRISES, INC.

Dear Customer:

We appreciate and sympathize with your dilemma. However, please be advised that according to our attorneys, your grounds for legal action are somewhat inadequate, considering the situation was caused by negligent use of our product. But we at ABRACADABRA want to help you as much as we possibly can. We suggest that you try our patented "Instant Vampire Remover" now available in your local stores in handy 12 oz. spray bottles (Special Discount Coupon enclosed). It is entirely safe, easy to use, non-toxic, and contains a special mixture of biodegradable organic materials including concentrated garlic extract and holy water.





ICEPLANT

Tires screech on pavement
trying to stop.

Head meets windshield
with a sickening thump -

A sound resembling
wet celery breaking
escapes from my neck;

White light explodes
behind my eyes;

Frozen iron spikes drive
deep into my back;

Wet searing pain as
my head separates from
my shoulders and tumbles
onto the freeway -

Clipped in the forehead by the
bumper of a passing truck,
my head flies into the air
over 880.

Surprised shock as I land
in the lap of the woman
driving her red convertible
5.0 Mustang at 65mph.

Screaming, she swerves into
the propane truck in the next lane.

The resulting fireball burns the
Iceplant they use as roadcover.

by D. R. Ridenhour



DUAL

by Jesse Conklin

A flicker to my left pulls my head around. There it is again. A tiny spot of light against a wall of black. Another decoy, perhaps. The regularity at this game has nearly deadened my desire for escape. But I must force myself to investigate each new lead, even if it's only another of my enemy's taunts. Countless times we've acted out this skit, my reward a persistent, gnawing frustration. I cling to a single hope: One time, the light that baits me will be authentic, and will steer me out of the tunnel.

I believe I've been in this darkness a very long time. It's difficult to be sure, time having become such a meaningless concept to me. Against the oppressive silence I hear the amplified ticking of the timepiece in my pocket, and I attempt to be amused at the irony. A faithful recording of time's passage, and no light bright enough to see it. I manage a weak smile. Who cares what time, or day, or month it is? No place to go. No friends waiting for me. They would have given up long ago.

Friends. I must've had them once. Now there is only him, the entirety of my situation encapsulated in that pronoun. I sicken as I realize that he is a closest thing I have to a friend. At least he reminds me I am still alive.

The unwavering blackness of my prison is a burden on my eyes, as they wearily hunt for reference points. It seems like I've been walking interminably, suggesting to me that this place is incalculably huge, or that I have been unknowingly travelling in circles. Only the floor beneath my feet gives me a sense of up or down, left or right. I feel akin to a driver in an endless fog, increasingly unable to determine if the nothing before him is real or illusory. I occasionally wonder if I have in fact lost my sight. Then comes the inevitable reminder that what I see is reality. That tiny point of light, ever out of reach. That cursed light, voicelessly laughing at me.

I try to be optimistic, difficult as it is for me, as I know it's my only hope. Though every glimpse of daylight up to now has been a ruse, I must not allow faith, my only valuable possession, to be destroyed by this evil jester. That would be ultimate defeat. I must tell myself each

time that I have finally discovered the exit, following the beacon faithfully. As soon as doubt precedes hope, my nemesis has truly prevailed.

I wonder what motive drives him. As he hasn't shown himself openly, I can only imagine his countenance, and wonder whether I am playmate or prey to him. A mixture, I suspect. Replayed in my mind is an image of a darkly clad grinning devil, torch in hand, chuckling as each sliver of my confidence is chipped away. I want to hate him, but I cannot. He delights in the prolonging of my misery, but he isn't the cause of it. That realization makes me all the more sick at heart. No one to blame. Nothing to lift the burden.

Mental ramblings distract me from my quest. Still hanging in the distance is this latest promise of escape, daring me to chase it. I halt my breathing momentarily, listening intently to my blank surroundings. Nothing but the incessant nagging of my watch. Is he here? Instinctively, my eyes search the darkness, though reason knows well the futility of it. My antagonist could stand three feet from me at any time, while I remain unaware. My nervous breathing resumes, and I move silently toward the light.

Something unseen catches my second step, and I fall, one knee smashing against the unforgiving ground. My weight slumps to one side, hands clutching my damp knee through the rip in my pants. I dutifully lick a finger, the salty taste attesting to skin broken from the impact.

Dismissing the pain, I bring my eyes up to relocate the light. After a few seconds, I refocus on it, just right of where I remember it. And closer now. Or is it brighter? It seems to delight in my disorientation, mocking me, goading me. Every part of me longs to ignore it. I want to sleep, give up this endless search. I have been lost in this dungeon so long that I forget if the surface world is really any better. What if I strain myself uselessly? I only want to sleep.

A cackle, his evil laugh, echoes through the chamber as he senses imminent victory. Imagined or real, that reverberating derision renews my vendetta; I must spite him. Still on one knee, I brace myself momentarily, then bolt toward the light with new determination. My body strives with strength it would not admit to seconds earlier, as I fly at my salvation. I will escape. I will emerge into sunlight, leaving this dank place and its demonic keeper behind me. I will triumph. I-

A barely perceptible snap marks the demise of my beacon. My disbelieving eyes search frantically for its reappearance, my legs still sprinting hopefully. Seconds pass before the truth penetrates - I have once again been deceived.

Slowing to a stop, I slump back to the ground in mixed exhaustion and frustration. I don't bother acting surprised, as there's no one around to be fooled. And there's no fooling myself; I've lied to myself often enough to know better. There really is no hope, a truth I have both known and denied all this time. There is no tunnel of light, no portal to the surface. This prison is my home.

I pray for tears to appear in my eyes, but I am denied even that small relief. Why should they appear? Tears are for the benefit of others. I have no others.

Still that evil metronome grates at me. I hurl the watch to the ground, silence restored in the wake of its shattering. On my knees, I idly test the sharpness of a glass shard against my fingertip. I must be bleeding, but I feel no pain. I feel nothing. I close my eyes, as though my mind could somehow achieve a deeper black than that which exists around me. Imagination loses that contest.

I sleep.

I've got to find it. Got to find it and get out of here. This darkness is going to drive me out of my mind. Maybe it already has. A chill slices through me, and the shaking starts again. I hate the dark.

I look around me for the millionth time. I feel the cold floor with my palms, feel the coarseness, feel the emptiness. Nothing. I'll never find it this way. Not in this hellish blackness. Not like this. Got to use the light. My light.

No. I can't. Can't. He comes when the light is on. That's how he finds me. He wants to hurt me, break me. He wants to keep me here, like a spider in a jar. One of those big spiders, with the long, thin, shiny legs. He'll keep me in the jar so he can hurt me any time he wants. No. I'm safe in the dark. He can't find me in the dark. I'll have to find it without using the light.

I crawl a bit further, and my head meets something hard and unexpected. My one hand tries to rub away the soreness as the other reaches out to identify the cause. A wall. I've reached the other side

already. This place isn't as big as I thought. So why haven't I found it yet? I've been looking for it as long as I can remember. Where is it?

The chill just got colder. It's only a matter of time before he finds me. Even stumbling around in this nothingness, he'll happen upon me sooner or later. He could be right behind me now!

I stand up quickly and whirl around, searching the darkness for his huge, lumbering bulk. No. He's not here. I would've heard that ticking. That damned ticking. The one thing that warns me when he comes to hurt me. Mustn't start imagining things. This darkness is getting to me. I hate the dark.

I can't just fumble around, hoping he doesn't find me. I have to use the light again. With the light, I can find it and get out of here before he gets me. I've got to find it! The old lighter comes out of my pocket once more.

Damn this shivering! I flick the lighter once, and it spits out a lone spark. Out of fluid already? No. There it goes. Now hold it steady. I feel a strange relief at seeing my own hands and body again. In the dark, how can you be sure you're really there? I feel like this place is slowly eating away at me. One of these times, the light will come on and I'll be gone. This time I'm okay.

My relief is smashed by the realization of my vulnerability. If I can see, he can see me. Got to be sure. Quiet. Still. Just listen. Nothing. No ticking. He's not here.

My eyes drop to the floor as I go about my task. It's got to be here somewhere. Just find it and get out of here. Out of here. Out of the dark. Keep looking. There! No. Nothing. Keep focused. Find it. Don't crack now.

I walk faster, nerves building upon nerves. This is almost as maddening as the darkness. Every inch of this place looks the same. Empty. Cold. Angry. What was that? Thought I heard something. I stop for a moment. Nothing. Must've been my own footsteps. Keep going. Keep looking. Keep focused.

Wait. This time I'm sure I heard it. I freeze in place, though certain parts of me continue to shake. I listen.

There it is. That ticking. That even, patient, cruel ticking. Every bit as threatening as the presence it announces. The fear and coldness strike me in alternating waves, nearly staggering me. My heart accelerates to match the tempo of the clicking.

I regain enough control to start backing away from it, first one step, then two more. No! I am backing toward it! I spin halfway. Yes. There it is. Off to my right. I hear another sound, but I can't make it out against the unbearable din of the ticking. I reorient myself and begin backing away again.

After a few steps, it occurs to me that the clicking is no longer following me. I pause. It it gone? No. Just further away. Distant. Still, he must see the light. He must know I'm here. He's going to hurt me. Going to break me.

Finally, I am fear's prisoner. Still clutching the lighter obsessively, I hug myself against the icy air, panic flashing imagery through my mind. A loud, piercing laugh rings out in the silence, and I realize it's me laughing. Not me, but rather the fear occupying me. I clap one hand over my mouth and fight to be silent.

Suddenly, the ticking rushes me like a dagger thrown through the air. He's coming for me! As I begin to back away helplessly, I see my hand, thumb still sustaining the lighter's flame. Turn it off! Escape in the darkness! I trip over my own steps as blackness is restored, and I fall to the ground, shuddering uncontrollably.

Still the ticking advances, and I hear his thundering footsteps bearing down on me. I try to make myself smaller by curling into a ball. I try to wish myself out of existence. Anything to escape him. I am going to die! I-

The footsteps race by me, taking the ticking with them. I hear his excited breathing as he barely misses me in the darkness. I remain in my prebirth position, listening as the ticking becomes less threatening, more distant, and finally passive.

A deafening smash assaults my ears as I begin to unfold myself. A tiny projectile strikes my face, perhaps shrapnel from the blast. The silence following is every bit as startling. No ticking. Nothing.

I am motionless for a full minute as I try to assess the situation. What has happened? Is my enemy dead? I pull myself erect, rearmed with the tiny flame. My eyes return to the ground, and I move forward, my fear and my quest eclipsed by curiosity. A glimmer catches my eye. Several small shards of glass litter the floor, turning the light back on me. I follow them.

A form begins to take shape in the dim light. A large lump. It looks almost- It is! A man, curled up and motionless on the ground. Is this

my monster? No. Just a man, nothing more. About my size. Nothing to be afraid of. Just a man.

What is that near him? A broken watch, shattered crystal everywhere. Watch? Ticking. Watch...ticking. It's him! My dark torturer, my voracious monster is this harmless man. I manage a weak smile. Then a broad grin, and soon I am laughing out loud.

I stop and listen to my laughter replayed for me in echoes. I hear not myself, but a madman, his deranged cackling sharp and poisonous. What has this dungeon turned me into? I am no longer the simple man. I am something far removed.

I turn slowly away from the fallen man and take a few steps, unconscious of the direction. Something appears in my peripheral vision, a rare occurrence in this dismal void. I rub my eyes and attempt to refocus, advancing further. Could his- yes. There it is! I had feared it would never be returned to me. I've found it at last! Now I can-

Darkness. My lighter! My light! My thumb flicks desperately at it, but I am helpless before the truth: I have no more light.

The blackness seeps into me.

"Anything, Doctor?"

At first the doctor seemed not to hear. Leaning over his patient, he wielded his penlight once more, shining it first in one eye, then the other. He looked closely for some reaction. Nothing. The machine concurred.

"No, no...I thought we had something there for a moment, but he's gone."



GERVAISE

Warmed by you,
I allow myself to forget
what I am...

The heat of you is maddening,
when your mortality
stings inside my veins.

I treasure you,
like no other
and am gone with morning.

Forget-me-not punctures
mar the perfection
of subtle curves,
your throat.

As much as I dare,
I love you.

by Kimberly Hall

